Online counselling in secondary schools: Would students seek help by this medium?

K. J. Glasheen, I. Shochet, & M.A. Campbell.

Corresponding author:

Kevin Glasheen

Queensland University of Technology (QUT)

School of Cultural and Professional Learning

A Block, Level 3, Room 325

Victoria Park Road Kelvin Grove campus

KELVIN GROVE QLD 4059 AUSTRALIA

tel: +61 7 3138 3425 fax: +61 7 3138 3987

email: k.glasheen@qut.edu.au

Abstract

Students in secondary schools experience problems that can impact on their wellbeing and educational outcomes. Although *face-to-face* counselling is available in most Australian secondary schools, many students, particularly boys, do not seek appropriate help. Research suggests that online counselling can be effective and increase engagement. This study of 215 secondary school students sought to assess students' intention to use online counselling if it was made available in schools. The results found no gender difference in the likely intentions to seek online help though year level was significant and students experiencing psychological distress had a preference for online counselling. If students did use online counselling it was more likely they would discuss sensitive topics rather than for career issues. Implications for school counselling are discussed.

Keywords: adolescence, help-seeking, mental health, online-counselling, schools, Australia.

Young Australians experience increasing levels of stress during their secondary schooling with issues such as school and study problems, relationship concenrs and body image (Mission Australia National Survey, 2012). It is during adolescence and early adulthood when affective disorders such as depression and anxiety often have their onset and continue throughout the lifespan (Hauenstein, 2003; Thapar, Thapar, Collishaw, & Pine, 2012). Such mental health conditions in adolescence can impact on their future health status (Sawyer et al., 2012), completion of education (Leach & Butterworth, 2012), and post-school career decision-making (Walker & Peterson, 2012), as well as compromising important relationships that develop at this crucial stage of psychological development (Johnson & Galambos, 2014). Therefore, the negative impact of poor mental health on the educational outcomes and personal wellbeing is increasingly a major focus for schools and school-based counsellors (De Jong & Griffiths, 2008; Rowling, 2007).

Though many secondary school students experience difficulties with relationships, academic demands, and mental health concerns, it is also a fact that many do not seek professional support when faced with such problems (Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007; Schonert-Reichl, 2003; Sheffield, Fiorenza, & Sofronoff, 2004; Smith, 2012). In one survey of mental health and wellbeing of Australian young people, only 20 % of adolescents who identified themselves as having problems, had accessed professional help during the six month period prior to the survey (Sawyer, Miller-Lewis, & Clark, 2007). This kind of finding is compounded by the fact that those who experience mental health difficulties and possible suicidal ideation, are typically less likely to seek help as their levels of psychological distress and self-destruction intentions increase. This phenomena has been described as the ‘negation effect’ (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005) and it poses a challenge to counsellors and mental health workers who strive to support troubled

young people. In a recent national survey, over 20 % of young people said they had nowhere to go for help (Mission Australia, 2012). Graetz (2006) has emphasised how important it is for young people who are experiencing depression and similar problems to be able to find a person at school that they can easily talk to.

Australian secondary schools are usually resourced with school counsellors and even though the school counsellor is the second most preferred professional person after a medical General Practitioner (Sawyer et al., 2000; Zubrick, Silburn, Burton, & Blair, 2000), most young people typically depend on their friends and parents for assistance (Raviv, Raviv, Vago-Gefen, & Fink. 2009; Rickwood, Dean, & Wilson, 2007). However, a survey of rural youth found that 56% of those surveyed reported that they would seek the help of the school counsellor as their first preference. They also noted that the fear of perceived social proximity and rural gossip inhibited young people's intention to seek help from anyone in their community (Boyd et al., 2011). As a result, appropriate professional support may not be sought when potentially serious mental health conditions are experienced by young people and indications are that this seems to apply to boys more than girls.

Research findings suggest that boys commonly seek help less than girls (Maclean, Hunt, & Sweeting, 2013) and often do not believe they need to do so (Johansson, Brunnberg, & Eriksson, 2007; Smith, 2012; Timlin-Scalera, Ponterotto, Blumberg, & Jackson, 2003). This is somewhat alarming, as a recent government report estimated that mental illness in males aged 12-25 not only has a high human cost, but financially it cost the Australian economy $3.27 billion per annum or $387,000 per hour across a year in lost productivity **(**Degney et al., 2012). Furthermore, suicide has been found to be the largest single cause of death in young Australian males aged 15–24 years (Degney et al., 2012). Together with the reluctance of both genders to seek help in the first instance, there is the concerning tendency that as students become more affected by the experiences of depression

and anxiety, there is a trend to seek help less as the severity of the condition increases (Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007). This previously stated 'help-negation' effect is a major obstacle to young people seeking help when they need it. It is, therefore, essential to provide ways for young people to seek help, with a potential focus on their preferred means of communicating with others.

Young people live and interact within a digital world. Relationships are often initiated, fostered and even terminated by the use of online technology (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008) and the use of texting in romantic relationships is also increasing (Morey, Gentzler, Creasy, Oberhauser, & Westerman, 2013). Relationships of these kinds often develop while at school and it has been found that a young person's sense of connectedness to school is a positive factor in influencing a student's emotional wellbeing (Frydenberg, Care, Freeman, & Chan, 2009; Sulkowski, Demaray, & Lazarus, 2012) especially as a preventative factor in combating the onset of anxiety and depression (Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006).

Together with the need to be connected with peers (Millings, Buck, Montgomery, Spears, & Stallard, 2012), young people tend to value immediacy when it comes to seeking information. The tendency to 'google' for answers to questions is not limited to educational tasks. Young people have shown a willingness to seek answers to health and personal questions online (Oh, Jorm, & Wright, 2009). Although it has been established that young people do seek online health information, little research has been conducted to identify the content, nature or mode of delivery of such material (Edwards-Hart & Chester. 2010). Australian community agencies such as the online youth mental health services *Reachout* (http://inspire.org.au/reachout-com) and *Headspace* (McGorry et al., 2007), together with the telephone and online counselling service of *Kids Help Line* (www.kidshelp.com.au), recognise the value of online resources. It is interesting, however, that within the education

sector, there seems to be a reluctance to adopt this emerging media for the purposes of encouraging help-seeking behaviours in distressed youth.

The utilisation of online technology to provide counselling has developed significantly in recent years (Alleman, 2002; Baker & Ray, 2011; Haberstroh, Duffey, Evans, Gee, & Trepal, 2007). Online counselling has become a possible means of assisting young people when they are facing emotional and mental health challenges. The effectiveness of online counselling has been found to be at least equal to *face-to-face* counselling (Barak, Hen, Boniel-Nissim, & Shapira, 2008; King, Bambling, Reid, & Thomas, 2006). Due the presence of a 'disinhibition effect' as described by Suler (2005), online interaction often leads to early disclosure of personal information and may in fact mean that the usual length of rapport building may be reduced online. There is also some evidence to suggest that males might seek help by accessing online assistance. Neville (2012) in an investigation of submissions to the Irish advice website found over 25% were from males who wrote about their emotionally-charged life situations. This study suggested that online platforms may assist males in developing enhanced 'emotional' masculinity. Moreover, an earlier study of adult males found that those who accessed online counselling experienced greater decreases in discomfort than those using *face-to-face* counselling (Rochlen, Land, & Wong, 2004).

Young people access community-based online counselling services to discuss a variety of issues. *Kids Help Line* in 2013 received 42% of their contacts online, with the primary reasons for such contact being mental health and emotional wellbeing concerns, such as suicide-related issues, self-injury, body image, sexual orientation, sexual activity, homelessness and pregnancy. Study and educational issues were also topics that were discussed (Kids Help Line, 2013).

Even though some community agencies are already providing online counselling to young people (Reynolds, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2011), this form of support presently does not exist in schools. At this stage there is also no research to determine whether young people would want to use online help if it was offered at school. However, the adoption by secondary schools of online counselling may well provide a productive pathway to help those students reticent to use *face-to-face* counselling at school.

Given the value of online counselling indicated above and some encouraging results for males using this medium, perhaps such a service might enhance access to help in general and narrow the gender gap in help-seeking behaviour. As well, it might be that the kinds of issues young people would be comfortable addressing through online counselling at school might be extended. An important question underpinning this research is whether the online counselling medium would attract students that need help most and to ascertain whether those most distressed would indicate an intention to use online counselling. In this regards it would be helpful to determine whether a) online counselling in schools would attract students over and above those that have previously sought *face-to-face* counselling, b) whether it would attract students that are already experiencing symptoms of psychological distress, and c) whether the concerns that would be discussed online would differ from those discussed *face-to-face*.

As online counselling seems to provide an emotional safety zone for many young people (King, Bambling, Reid, & Thomas, 2006) it could be expected that its introduction into the school setting would result in young people seeking counselling who otherwise would be embarrassed to seek *face-to-face* counselling. Research conducted by Ryan, Shochet and Stallman (2010) showed that university students with high levels of psychological distress indicated an intention to access an online mental health program. Therefore, there is some reason to expect that this medium may similarly attract secondary

school students who are experiencing some level of psychological distress, including those who have not previously sought *face to face* counselling.

Study Aims

The study focused on students within the secondary school environment and sought to gauge student *intentions to use* online counselling if it was offered by their school counsellor. It also sought to identify which students would be likely to use online counselling, and what concerns they would most likely discuss online.

The research questions were:

1. What would be the frequency of likely intention to use school online counselling?

2. What influence does gender, prior counselling experience, year level, and levels of psychological distress have on students' intention to use school online counselling?

3. What would be the concerns students would be prepared to discuss in online counselling?

Method

Participants

Two hundred and fifteen secondary school students (103 males and 112 females) from five government and two non-government schools in South East Queensland in Australia participated in the study. Due to timetabling restrictions, the researchers were given limited access to students. Though the average enrolment of the schools was 900 students, approximately only a third were given the opportunity to participate in the survey. Of the approximate total of 2000 students invited to participate, only 10% returned consent forms and completed the survey. An average of 43 students from each year level completed the survey. The year level of the participants was identified instead of age, as initiatives in secondary schools are often managed at specific grades for organisational purposes.

Measures

An online survey consisting of 36 items was administered during class time. The online survey was created in such a way that participants, to advance within the survey, had to complete all questions except for one (whether they had or had not attended counselling before) thereby minimising the risk of missing data. Two questions ascertained students' likely intentions to use online counselling: '*If online counselling with the school guidance counsellor/guidance officer was available, and you needed to contact them, would you use this online service?'; 'Would you use online chat with the guidance counsellor/guidance officer as a way of getting to know them before going to see him/her?'*, with three available responses of *yes*, *maybe* or *no*. Three items asked the student's Year level, gender and past counselling experience. Four items were on student technology use; for example, *'How important is it for you to be able to contact your friends on a social network site (such as Facebook)?'* Eight items required participants to identify their help-seeking behaviours in response to a scenario indicating symptoms of depression, such as *'If I was feeling that way, I would phone a crisis line such as Kids Help Line; I would talk to my friends; I would go to my GP (Doctor)'*. Awareness of counselling services in the school was tested by two questions: '*Do you know who the school guidance counsellor/guidance officer is?'* Seven items covered student preferences on how online counselling would need to be conducted; for example, '*The chat room being used for counselling would need to be secure'; 'I would need to know if a copy of the online 'chat' is going to be kept'*. There were 10 questions that asked participants' preferences to discuss specific issues *face-to-face* or online, with a five point Likert response scale of *definitely prefer online(1); maybe prefer online(2); either(3); maybe prefer face-to-face(4); definitely prefer face-to-face(5)*. The listed items included - *conflict at home; conflict with students; study or school work; help with career plans; cyberbullying; concerns about sexuality; and advice about helping a friend.* Participants

also completed a scale focusing on stress concerns (the Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale).

Depression Anxiety Stress Scale -Short Version - DASS 21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995; Henry & Crawford, 2005). This is a 21-item set of three self-report scales designed to measure the occurrence in the preceding week of negative emotional states of depression (*e.g., Over the past week, I felt that I had nothing to look forward to*), anxiety (*e.g., I felt close to panic*) and stress (*e.g., I tended to over-react to situations*). For this sample, the DASS 21 had a total reliability of .95 with subscore reliabilities of Stress r=.88; Anxiety r=.82 and Depression r=.90.

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate university ethics committee and from the educational authorities of the schools. Signed parental consent forms and student assent were obtained prior to students completing the online questionnaire. The survey administration was coordinated by the school guidance counsellor at each school; however, the students were supervised completing the survey online by a teacher during school time and participants notified the teacher when they finished. The survey took approximately fifteen minutes.

Results

The majority of participants (89.3 %) indicated that they used a computer or smart phone to chat with their friends and 81.4 % used social network sites (e.g., Facebook) to contact their friends. Most participants thought that using a computer or smart phone to chat with their friends was important (66.5 %) with a similar percentage (65.2 %) rating the same for social networking sites.

In regard to the likely intention to use online counselling at school, as measured by the item '*If online counselling with the school guidance counsellor/guidance officer was*

available, and you needed to contact them, would you use this online service?', there were no significant differences in terms of gender ($\chi^2(2, N = 215) = 0.92$, $p = .63$) or prior counselling experience at school ($\chi^2(2, N = 213) = 0.87$, $p = .65$). There was a statistically significant difference for Year level (F (4, 210 = 3.685), $p < .01$). Post-hoc comparisons using Bonferroni revealed that the mean scores for Year 8 ($M = 1.55$, $SD = .63$) and Year 11 ($M = 2.08$, $SD = .65$) differed significantly (see Table 1).

(Insert Table 1 about here)

It is important to note that a cumulative percentage of 80 % of females and over 84 % of males indicted that they either might or would be likely to use online counselling if made available.

Psychological Distress

In order to test whether those students with greater levels of distress might prefer online counselling, students in the moderate and severe range of psychological distress were compared to students with normal and low levels of distress. The cut-off points for this distinction were based on the DASS manual (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). For the subscale of depression the cut-off was greater than or equal to 7, for anxiety the cut-off was 6 and for stress the cut-off was 10. Separate chi squared analyses showed significant differences for depression ($\chi^2(2) = 6.18$, $p < .05$) and stress ($\chi^2(2) = 6.73$, $p < .05$), whilst anxiety differences were not significant ($\chi^2(2) = 2.21$, $p = .33$). Table 2 provides the proportion of students endorsing online counselling by levels of psychological distress.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

It is interesting to note that 94.5 % of students with moderate to severe levels of depression indicated that they may or would be likely to seek help online. Similarly, 96% of students with moderate to severe symptoms of stress indicted they may or would be likely to use on online services if made available.

Counselling Concerns

Concerns about sexuality ranked as the issue with the lowest mean (i.e., *Definitely prefer online*) indicating a likely intention to use online counselling for that concern, while concerns about career were ranked least likely to be discussed online. The distribution of issues that students identified as more suitably dealt with online are presented in Table 3.

(Insert Table 3 about here)

T tests revealed that there were no gender differences in the preference for online or *face-to-face* counselling for any of the specific concerns. Half of the students (50.2 %) would *definitely* or *maybe prefer* to discuss concerns about sexuality online, in contrast to *face-to-face*. This contrasts with the fact that less than one in ten (9.3 %) of students would be likely to discuss their career plans online, in contrast to *face-to-face*. Just over one quarter of students would prefer online counselling rather than *face-to-face* when dealing with conflict at home, while one in five students would prefer this medium to discuss issues related to worrying thoughts or feelings (18.6 %), bullying at school (20.9 %) and cyberbullying (20.4 %). Less personal issues such as helping a friend (14.4 %), someone to talk to (13.5 %) and study or school work (9.8 %) saw less interest in seeking help online.

Discussion

The primary research question in this study was to ascertain the extent to which students would use online counselling at school if made available. In addition we wanted to

establish whether boys or girls and those that have had prior counselling experience at school would differ in their likely intentions to utilise the service. In addition we wanted to ascertain whether those with greater psychological distress might have a greater likely intention to use an online service. Finally, we wanted to ascertain the issues that students would prefer to discuss online in contrast to *face-to-face* counselling.

Over 80 % of students indicated they definitely would or might use online counselling if it was offered by the school counselor. Thirty-nine percent of students were definite, with another 43.7 % indicating that they may use it. However, 18 % of students reported they would not use online counselling if it was available. There was no significant difference in gender in intention to use online counselling at school.

It is interesting to note that almost half of the females (48.6 %) who completed the survey had previous *face-to-face* counselling at school compared with less than one quarter of the male students (21.6 %). This finding supports previous research that has consistently found that females are more likely to seek counselling support than males (Judd, 2008). It is encouraging to see that this gender difference was not replicated in students' likely intentions to use online counselling. This finding extends the earlier conclusion of Neville (2012) that males might prefer to seek information and advice online. One possible explanation could be related to how the image of masculinity shapes the context of male help-seeking behaviours. Addis and Mahalik (2003) proposed that males seem willing to seek help as long as they have the ability to reciprocate the help. Possibly when using technology for help-seeking, there is a sense of detachment or even de-personalisation and consequently there is not a sense of needing to reciprocate. Research on gaming dynamics has found that when males changed the gender of their avatar, they were more likely to seek help (Lehdonvirta, Nagashima, Lehdonvirta, & Baba, 2012). Males who are emotionally

restrictive may prefer online counselling (Rochlen, Land, & Wong, 2004); however, the reasons why this is so require further investigation.

Previous counselling experience did not appear to determine the level of intention to use online counselling. This finding suggests that those who had not sought counselling previously might consider online counselling. School counsellors both in focus groups and by a survey reported that they would consider offering online counselling if students would accept it (Glasheen, Campbell, & Shochet, 2013; 2014). The level of support for online counselling by this sample of students provides some indication that their concern is unwarranted.

In the comparison of *face-to-face* counselling with online counselling students who intended to seek help online were more likely to want to discuss personal and sensitive concerns such as sexuality. This contrasts with a preference for students to be physically present with the school counsellor to discuss their career plans. Online counselling could be supportive of students who are struggling with issues related to sexuality as it is usually during their secondary school years that young people are determining their sexual identity. As students indicated that they were more likely to discuss sexuality issues online suggests that the disinhibition effect of online communication (Suler, 2005) permits people to discuss concerns that would normally be regarded as stigmatising (Fenichel et al., 2002). As some of these students may be same sex attracted youth (SSAY), online communication allows these young people to regulate who and when they disclose personal facts about their sexuality. Online counselling at school may assist them to control their visibility. This has been termed as *visibility management* by Lasser and Tharinger (2003) who proposed that it was a key construct in the identity development of SSAY. The present study highlights the possible usefulness of school online counselling for SSAY but it may also provide some assistance in the ongoing development of their identity.

Interestingly it was found that unlike sexual issues, young people prefer to discuss their career development needs *face-to- face* with the school counsellor. This is noteworthy as there has been much effort in recent years to develop many online career assessment tools and career exploration programs (Jencius & Rainey, 2009). The fact that students indicated a preference for *face-to-face* career counselling is interesting in spite of the fact that many career development resources and career exploration programs are found online.

It was found that those students commencing their high school experience (Year 8) and those about to conclude their secondary education (Year 12) indicated a greater intention to access online counselling at school than students in other years. Assumptions as to why this occurred need further exploration though it may be associated with the transitions that both cohorts of students are encountering in these year levels. In a previous study by Zeedyk et al. (2003) a major concern of students entering high school was getting lost. Almost a third of Year 8 students have been found to have a difficult transition to high school (Waters, Lester, Wenden, & Cross, 2012). It may be that year 8 students are not as familiar with the counselling support in secondary schools, and online counselling provides a less threatening way of approaching help. Another possibility is that as they are starting a new phase of learning, they are open to innovative ideas and are willing to 'try out' what is on offer in their new high school. The reason that students in their final year of school are more likely to seek help online is also unknown. The developmental stage of transitioning from adolescence to adulthood may be more a concern for students at this year level or it may be due to the increased use of technology with age and the decrease of parental controls (Harris, Straker, & Pollock, 2013). At this stage they are more likely to have integrated technology into their social interactions (Morey, Gentzler, Creasy, Oberhauser, & Westerman, 2013) and are more comfortable with communicating openly online. As a result

it is more convenient to go online at a time when studies are more pressing and when the online world has become a familiar and natural way of sourcing assistance. It may also be a time when they become aware of how psychological concerns may be impinging on their social interactions and relationships.

As psychological distress increased the intention to use online counselling was found to increase. The fact that students of secondary school age would seek online help complements earlier findings that distressed university students would seek mental health programs online (Ryan, Shochet, & Stallman, 2010) and indicates that online communication is potentially a useful medium to improve help seeking in distressed young people in both secondary and tertiary education. The percentage of students with scores on the DASS 21 subscales which were in the moderate and above levels of depression and stress, had a greater intention to seek online counselling. If students who are depressed and stressed are more likely to seek online counselling, it may be due to the sense of emotional safety and the relative anonymity provided by using computer mediated communication. This confirms earlier studies with clients at Kids Help Line felt less vulnerable when communicating with online counsellors (Bambling, King, Reid, & Wegner, 2008; Beattie, Cunningham, Jones, & Zelenko, 2006). This is a very encouraging finding in light of the research that suggests that a high proportion of students with psychological distress to do not seek appropriate help. As those with high levels of psychological distress indicate a preference for online counselling, the availability of this form of online support may contribute in overcoming and combating the 'negation effect' when other forms of support are not accessed (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005). The finding would indicate that this avenue of online support might increase help-seeking at this crucial time. Such potential benefits for distressed young people are a positive argument for expanding online counselling services into the schools.

Limitations

A major limitation of this study is that it investigated intention and not behaviour. The design of this study was limited to measuring the intention to use online counselling. Even though it does suggest that vulnerable students may intend to access online counselling at school, it does not establish that they actually would make use of the service if it was provided. Clinical trials of online counselling in schools would need to be conducted to ascertain if students would translate intention into participation in online counselling. Additionally, the sample size was relatively small. Though a large number of students were invited to participate in this research, the majority of students did not return the signed parental permission forms. It could be argued that those who chose to participate in this study were positively biased towards the use of technology. Though the participants were drawn from a variety of secondary schools both government and independent, the study due to practical constraints, did not include students attending schools in remote geographical areas where online counselling has been found to be effective for those affected by distance (Hernan, Philpot, Edmonds, & Reddy; 2010; Strid & Efford, 2001). Nevertheless this study has provided important indicators to show that students from urban schools also consider online counselling as a potentially beneficial service.

The conclusion that students with elevated levels of psychological distress would *definitely* or *maybe prefer* to use online counselling is based on the results of the DASS 21which is a self-report instrument. Although the DASS 21 is a well-established psychometric measure with excellent predictions of caseness (Brown, Chorpita, Korotitsch, & Barlow, 1997; Osman et al., 2012), these scores are not collaborated by clinician administered assessments and therefore a lack of accuracy may occur due to the nature of the self-reporting process. Further research with clinical samples is therefore required to ascertain if the recommended cut-off levels for this self-report do in fact determine a

psychiatric diagnosis (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). In spite of these limitations the survey provides very encouraging results that online counselling in schools may help close the gender gap in help seeking, might engage students that are more psychologically distress and might also be a vital forum to discuss particularly sensitive topics such as sexuality.

Conclusion

A cross sectional study of secondary school students found that over 80 % of young people would use online counselling if it was provided by the school counsellor. There were no gender differences in intention to use school online counselling. Younger students transitioning into secondary school (Year 8) and senior students completing their schooling (Year 12) are more likely to use online counselling. Significantly more female students in the sample had accessed *face-to-face* counselling with the school counsellor than male students, however, the fact that there was no gender difference in intention to use online counselling indicates the potential of this medium to help males. Similarly online counselling may assist students with elevated levels of depression and stress. Sexuality and other sensitive issues have the potential to impact on a young person's mental health and educational outcomes and this study highlighted how an online service in schools could assist students experiencing such issues. We do not advocate that all counselling needs to be online as many students still prefer to meet the counsellor in a *face-to-face* situation for certain concerns, however, we suggest that online counselling may assist some of those students who have up until now, been reticent to access the services of the school counsellor. It will only be through the implementation and practice of online counselling in secondary schools that the usefulness of such an innovation will be ascertained.

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